

What Could Have Been by eusticegertrude

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Summary: What if when Eleven was leaving that day at the school, she ran into Will? A what could have been AU.

1. Chapter 1

Hi guys! Wow, it's been a hot second since I wrote anything. However, after the second season of Stranger Things became available on Netflix, I have become obsessed with this idea, and exploring how the second season would have changed if this had happened. So for the first time in like four years, please enjoy this story that has been bouncing around in my head:

Eleven watched as Mike grabbed the girl with fiery hair's hand and helped her up. She felt something welling up within her, something she hadn't expected to feel today.

Sadness. Mike was having fun without her. He was forgetting her. Eleven.

Eleven turned on her heel and started walking towards the school exit. All she knew was that she needed to get away from here. From the school, from Mike, from everything.

She faintly heard a door open behind her, but she ignored it and walked out the exit of Hawkins Middle, towards the woods.

Eleven walked aimlessly away from the school, feeling impossibly sad. Mike was happy without her, he didn't need her anymore. She wondered if he would even bother to call that night.

Eventually, she started walking towards the woods, with the intention of headed back towards the cabin. Eleven knew Hopper was going to be furious with her, but at that moment she didn't care.

She had just made it to the treeline when she heard it.

It was a whimpering noise, along with the sound of feet hitting the ground, like someone was terrified and was running as fast as they could. Hesitantly, she turned around and look back at the field adjacent to the school, the one she had just walked across.

A small boy was sprinting across the field towards her, but he wasn't

seeing her. No, he was running like he was running from something, something that was chasing him.

Eleven had never met him before, but she knew who it was immediately. Will Byers. The one she had helped save from the Upside Down.

She had a horrible feeling that something was happening again here. Hopper had told her about Will having flashbacks into the Upside Down, but she knew immediately by looking at Will that this couldn't be a flashback. It was very, and scarily, real.

Eleven closed her eyes and reached out with her mind until she could feel Will's. She concentrated as hard as she could, until she felt her mind in sync with his. When she opened her eyes, she was seeing what he was seeing.

Eleven almost couldn't believe it.

Will was in the Upside Down, and hovering over Hawkins Middle was an indescribable humongous, black *thing*. Eleven could feel the hatred and hunger emanating from it like a fireplace, but with cold. It was very, very cold. A shadow.

Will slowed to a stop, and turned around. He shivered like he was in the middle of a blizzard. Without thinking, Eleven ran towards him, calling his name as loud as she possibly could. She had to help him.

"Will!"

Will snapped back around, looking terrified and shell-shocked. The *thing* behind him was drawing closer, and Eleven knew she had to get them out of there.

"Let's go! Come!" She grabbed his hand and began dragging him towards the treeline. He stumbled at first, but quickly he regained his footing and soon they were both sprinting as fast as they could. Eleven could feel that thing drawing ever closer. All she knew was that she didn't want it near her or Will.

When they reached the treeline Eleven stopped in her tracks. Will scrambled to a stop beside her, breathing hard. She had pulled herself

into his vision, hadn't she? Maybe she could pull him back into her own, back into Hawkins.

She closed her eyes and focused on the connection she had made. She grabbed onto Will and began pulling his mind to follow hers. He resisted for a second, like something was holding him in the Upside Down, but ultimately his mind gave way to her lead.

She opened her eyes just as the *thing* that was like a shadow reached the tree line, but immediately the Upside Down faded back into Hawkins. She could see the field was sunny and Hawkins Middle was vine-free.

Will was still standing beside her, breathing hard, with his eyes screwed shut. Eleven knew he still believed the shadow was going to get him.

Gently, she touched his shoulder.

"Will?"

Slowly, he opened his eyes, blinking rapidly in the light of day. He couldn't believe it, but he was somehow back in Hawkins. The monster was gone.

As his eyes adjusted he looked at the girl who had saved him. She had a mop of curly hair, and was wearing an oversized flannel paired with overalls. She looked like a normal kid. And yet...only one person he knew of could have done what she just did. It couldn't be, and yet...?

"Eleven?"

So? Was it good? Bad? In between? Upside Down? Let me know what ya think! Constructive criticism is always welcome!

2. Chapter 2

Hello! Welcome to the second installment of: What Could Have Been! I hope everyone enjoyed Chapter 1.

I don't know why but it's actually feeling great to write things that aren't college papers! Anyways, I'm still on the fence about how long I should make this story...I'm thinking around 10 chapters, but that's definitely not set in stone. I'll keep you guys updated about that whole situation.

I actually wrote out my general plot line for this, which is a first! Super exciting stuff. Also, due to request I am going to do my absolute best to make the chapters a lot longer than Chapter 1 was.

I meant for this to be around 1,500 words...oops?

Hope everyone is having a nice December!

Will was still shaking violently, both from fear and the extreme cold that was the Upside Down. He thought he was still hallucinating for a second, because Eleven took a moment to answer his question.

"Yes." She replied, looking down. Her curly hair was just long enough to shield her eyes from his field of vision.

"What are you-" Will stammered, "How are you-"

He was interrupted by the sound of someone yelling his name.

"Will! Will where are you?" Looking back at the middle school, Will could see Mike making his way towards the woods where he and Eleven were just hidden by the trees. He looked like he was really worried. Eleven's eyes widened as she saw Mike, and she looked back at Will with a panicked expression.

"Have to go."

"What? Why?" Will was so confused by everything going on. It felt

like someone had taken a VHS tape of everything that was going on and placed it on fast forward. He couldn't keep up.

"Mike can't see me. Too dangerous."

"Eleven-"

"Don't tell anyone. Please?" She looked at him pleadingly. "Between us. I'll come back and explain, later. Promise."

Will looked from her back to Mike, who was getting closer with every second.

"Okay, but I really do have a lot of questions-" Will had barely agreed when she cut him off.

"Thank you." With that, she took off running, deeper into the forest. Soon, all that was left of her was an fading crunch made by her feet as they smashed down dry leaves. Will looked after her, still in shock. He had so many questions. Why did he agree to do that? How was she still alive? How had she saved him? *Where had she been?*

"*Will!*" Mike had spotted him, and was now running towards him. Will's legs couldn't take it anymore, and he slowly sank to the ground, his mouth wide open and his face frozen in shock. Mike skidded to a stop and knelt down beside Will as he reached him.

"Shit, what happened? Are you okay? Was it the shadow monster again?" Mike fired off all of these questions in the span of a second.

"I- I don't-" He stopped. He had promised Eleven he wouldn't say anything. He took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. It didn't really work.

"It was the shadow monster." He told Mike. Mike's eyes grew wide with concern.

"Did it get you?" He asked.

"No, I only just got away, I don't know how."

Mike shuddered. "Are you okay?"

Will took another deep breath, attempting to calm himself down again.

"Yeah, I think so, but I'm worried. If this keeps happening, it's going to get me soon." Will shuddered at the thought. "I wish I knew what it *wants*."

Mike looked at him with worry. "Me, too. I don't think these are in your head. They can't be." Will nodded slowly in agreement. If Eleven had pulled him out of it, they definitely couldn't just be in his head.

"I think you're right."

"Will! *Will!*" Lucas, Dustin, Max, and his mom had all come were all outside, standing in the field.

"Over here!" Mike shouted, standing up and running towards the tree line. He waved his arms so they could see him. "In the woods!"

Immediately, all four of them broke into a run. They made it to Mike in record time. Ms. Byers was the first to speak. "Where is he?"

"Over here." Will called, weakly waving from his position on the ground.

"Will! What happened? Are you okay?" His mom was at his side within seconds.

"I'm fine, Mom." He looked over towards Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max, who were all staring at him with unease, and in Max's case, a little bit of confusion. It made him a little uncomfortable. He needed to leave, so he could try to catch up with everything that had happened. It felt like it had been hours since he found Dart, but in reality he knew it had only been a few minutes.

Will looked up at his mom solemnly. "I think we should go home."

Mike had been having a rough year.

Between Will's problems, the annoying new girl, and Eleven being gone for so long, he felt that soon his head might actually explode.

Other times, he felt like he might have hallucinated last year and made Eleven up. She almost felt like a dream now. He knew it was crazy, but sometimes he really felt that she was there. He could feel her presence, like she was giving him a hug.

He had had a feeling last night, too. When he was trick or treating, he turned around and Will was nowhere to be seen. Immediately, he felt a sense of foreboding, and that he needed to be somewhere. Something terrible was going to happen if he didn't act fast.

Somehow, he could feel where he was supposed to go, like a weak magnet was pulling him. He took off in that direction, and he ended up finding Will, curled in a ball and shaking like a leaf. And not a moment too soon, apparently. The shadow monster had almost gotten him.

Today, he had that same awful feeling as soon as they couldn't find Will after looking for Dart. When they split up to look for him, Mike felt an inexplicable pull that drew him to the field outside, to the woods. He followed it, knowing that it would help him. Somehow, Mike knew now that these episodes were real. Will was really seeing the Upside Down, and that shadow monster was really after him.

When Will told him about the shadow monster, and how it had almost gotten him, his worry turned into anxiety, and anger at his helplessness. His friend was in danger, and he couldn't do anything to help him. He was useless.

Mike stood with the rest of the party, not including Max, he stubbornly insisted to himself, and watched as Mrs. Byers walked Will to their car.

"Okay, that totally freaked me out. Did that not freak you guys out?" Max asked as she watched Will open the door to the passenger's side.

"Two episodes in two days." Lucas said.

"It's getting worse." Mike agreed.

"You think it's true sight?" Mike looked at Lucas and shook his head. *Not here.*

"What's true sight?"

Lucas came to his senses. "It's nothing." That ended their conversation rather abruptly. Mike stared after the car as it made its way towards the main road.

Tomorrow. He told himself. Whatever this is, we can talk to Will tomorrow and get to the bottom of this and figure out how to stop it. Whatever this bastard is, it's not gonna get Will. We won't let it.

"We'll talk tomorrow." Mike said pointedly. "I need to get home." He wouldn't betray Will's secret about the shadow monster he had been seeing to the others, yet. First he wanted to talk to Will about it. First thing in the morning, before he told anyone else about it. He sighed, wishing he could get a second opinion on his decision. If only Eleven were here. She would be able to help and then some.

She always knew what to do.

Joyce Byers sat her son down at the dining room table.

"Alright, talk to me, sweetie." She said once they had gotten themselves situated. "What happened in the field? Did you have another episode?"

Will looked at her for a moment, gauging her facial expression. She looked concerned, but there was something else. Fear. Maybe she had realized that these episodes weren't fake too. Maybe he could tell her the truth.

"Yes. I had another episode."

His mom drew in a breath, as if she had been expecting that to be his answer, but she had hoped with all her heart that it wasn't.

"What happened?"

In a shaky tone, he told her about running out of the school after he had flashed into the Upside Down, and how he had turned around to see the shadow monster. How he had just gotten away, right before it got him. He didn't mention Eleven, even though he wanted to. Oh,

did he want to. But he had promised her.

His mom had been listening to his story with wide eyes, and the look of concern that was first on her face had changed to a look of horror. When he finished, she didn't say anything. She just sat for a moment, and then she got up and walked into the kitchen.

"Mom?"

She was back a second later, with his drawing of the shadow monster from the night before Halloween and a piece of translucent paper with a crayon rendering. She slapped them down in front of him.

"I was looking through the Halloween tape today, and this shape was outlined on it. I don't think that these episodes are in your head at all. I think they're real. I think Dr. Owens is wrong."

The crayon drawing and his own were almost identical. The same shape.

Will had never been more relieved that someone believed him in his life. All his thoughts and things he had been wanting to say came pouring out, all at once.

"Mom, I think you're right. I don't think they are in my head at all. But that means-" He took a shaky breath. "That that *thing* is after me, and I don't know how to stop myself from going back to the Upside Down and I *know* next time I go back it's going to get me, I mean it was so close today and-" He didn't exactly know when he had begun to cry, but now there were tears streaming down his face.

"Hey, hey!" His mom said softly, pulling him into a hug. "Sweetie, it's gonna be okay. The shadow monster isn't gonna get you, alright? I'm not going to let it." She pulled back and cradled his head in her hands, brushing away a few tears. She looked into his eyes. "I will never, ever, let anything bad happen to you again, okay? I promise."

Will put his head back on her shoulder. "I just want this to be over."

She held him for a while, until he finally felt like he was strong enough to stand up and move to the couch. His mom went to the kitchen to make him dinner and a mug of tea, which had always been

the key for calming him in the past.

Later, when it had begun to get dark out and Will had brushed his teeth in preparation for bed, his mom turned to him.

"Do you want me to sleep in your room tonight, sweetie? It might help those nightmares you keep having stay away." She didn't voice her other reasoning, which was that she felt more like she would be able to protect him if she was there while he slept.

Will couldn't risk it, when he thought about Eleven and her promise to return. So even though he desperately wanted her company, he was forced to say, "That's alright, Mom. I'll be fine."

She smiled at him, a little wistfully, and told him to come get her if he needed anything. He nodded, trying to seem nonchalant. It was time to see if Eleven really did keep her promises.

Will was sitting on his bed a few hours later, wrapped up in his thoughts. Usually he would be drawing right about now, but he was to anxious to even do that. There had been no sign of Eleven.

He was thinking about how he could possibly stop himself from having another episode, when he heard what he was convinced he would never hear.

A soft knock.

His head snapped around to look at his window, and he gasped in shock. It was Eleven. She was looking into his room curiously, eyes scanning over all of the drawings plastered across his walls. A flashlight was clutched in one of her hands.

He rushed over and threw the window open.

"Eleven?" Her eyes focused on him.

"Shh. Quiet." She beckoned for him to come out of the window. He did, clambering out as quietly as possible. Hopefully his mom wouldn't notice he was gone.

Eleven began walking towards the woods that surrounded his house, in the back. Will stood on his porch, watching her hesitantly.

She turned around and beckoned towards him again. "Come."

He was going to be in so much trouble for this.

Sighing, he stepped off his porch and followed Eleven into the woods, shivering a bit from the frosty air. They walked side by side in silence for a few minutes, the forest just barely illuminated by the light from Eleven's flashlight, until they reached the place Will realized Eleven must have intended to go all along. Castle Byers.

They hurried inside, and quickly Will situated himself on one side of the little bed of blankets that he always kept here. Eleven sat across from him. She put the flashlight in between them, pointing up, so they could see each other's faces. He looked at her for a few moments, not having any idea where to begin. He got the feeling that she wasn't all that sure, either.

He broke the silence first.

"I wanted to thank you." Eleven's eyebrows raised, like she wasn't expecting that to be the first thing out of his mouth.

"What?" She asked.

"For saving me last year. I had almost given up hope when you came to me. And then, after that you killed the Demogorgon, and saved Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. You sacrificed yourself for them, and you saved me. Not to mention saving me from that *thing* in the field today." Will still couldn't believe she had been selfless enough to do all those things.

"Friends would do anything for each other." She said softly, smiling just a little bit.

"Still, you sacrificed yourself for them, and that's huge. I just wanted to say thanks."

Eleven looked at him seriously. "Would do it again."

Will stared at her. "You really are just like Mike said, incredible."

At the mention of Mike, Eleven's face fell. She became very interested in playing with the hem of her jacket. "Miss him." She admitted.

Will was still confused about why she had not revealed herself to anyone, especially Mike. Wasn't he supposed to be her closest friend?

"Why haven't you talked to him? To anyone? Everyone, especially Mike, has been worrying about you since the night you disappeared. Where have you been?"

"It's not safe. Not allowed to talk to him. The Bad Men are still at the lab. I talk to Mike, they will hurt him." Eleven looked positively depressed as she said this, like it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. "I talk to anyone, the Bad Men will find out and hurt them."

Will guessed he could understand this, although he didn't like it. He had seen all the doctors and the general creepiness that was Hawkins Lab firsthand. That place was never fun to visit.

"So where have you been living all this time? The woods?" He honestly didn't understand how she had survived the winter out there. Will could remember that last winter it had snowed, a lot. Almost every day.

Eleven took a moment to speak, collecting her thoughts. Her explanation was going to be a long one.

"After the Demogorgon, I woke up in the Upside Down, in the school." She told Will. "Found a hole in the school, a gate that I used. Made it back to the real school, but no one was there. I went to Mike's house, but when I got there the Bad Men were everywhere." Eleven sighed, saddened by this. "Realized talking to Mike would put him in danger, so I hid in woods for a while. Many days. Was cold, lots of snow. Then I found a box in the woods, with Eggo's inside. Found out Hopper was leaving them for me, so I showed myself to him. Been living with him since, in a cabin in woods."

Will listened with a sense of disbelief. She had been with *Hopper*?

This entire time? That was something difficult to wrap his head around.

"So this entire time, while everyone thought you were dead, *Hopper* has been taking care of you?"

Eleven nodded. "Didn't want to stay away, but too dangerous to let out the secret."

Now Will had even more questions than before, if that were possible. "So what were you doing at Hawkins Middle today?"

Now Eleven looked embarrassed. "Got angry that I couldn't leave. Nothing ever happens in cabin. Broke the rules. Wanted to visit Mike, but ended up seeing you instead. Realized you were in trouble."

"How did you know that?"

"Hopper told me about episodes, and thought you must be having one when I saw you running. I touched your mind so I could pull mine to see what you were seeing. Saw the shadow, and knew that I needed to get you out."

Will was eternally grateful Eleven had gotten stir-crazy enough to leave the cabin that day. "What is the shadow?" He asked. "I thought for a while that it wasn't real, but my mom got a shape of it on the video tape recording I made from Halloween."

Eleven looked solemn. "It's real. I can feel it. It's watching us, from the Upside Down. Knows we're here."

Will stiffened at that revelation. Suddenly, sitting in the middle of the woods at night time didn't feel like the safest idea.

"Can- Can it get us here?" He was almost too afraid to ask the question.

Eleven looked determined. "No. I will keep your mind here. No more episodes." Will breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

Shifting his thoughts, he had another realization. They had no idea what was going on, but something was obviously happening in

Hawkins again, something to do with the Upside Down. And that meant that they needed to talk to the idea guy, to see if he could help them come up with some strategies for how to deal with this. They needed Mike, before anyone else. They needed his brain.

"We need to figure out what's happening. Why the shadow monster wants me, and why it has shown up to Hawkins only now." Will stated. After a moment's hesitation, Eleven nodded her head in agreement. "You have ideas?" She asked.

"No." Will smiled. "But I know someone who will. We need to talk to Mike."

Alrighty, hope you enjoyed Chapter 2! I will make my best effort to get Chapter 3 out soon. As always, constructive criticism is much appreciated! Any thoughts on what you liked and didn't like are also great!

3. Chapter 3

Woohoo! Chapter 3 is here!

I loved all the feedback for Chapter 2. Thanks for giving this story a chance!

Sorry this took so long, holidays, sickness, and writer's block caused my writing time to be scarce recently.

Also, just FYI if something happens after a kind of crucial scene and I didn't write about it here (AKA like I didn't write about Eleven's lovely psychic tantrum last chapter), you can just assume that it happens exactly like in S2. The only difference being that Eleven snuck out to talk to Will after her and Hopper's fight. You can also assume that Joyce has been calling Hopper like she did in the show, trying to get in touch with him.

Hopefully that makes things a little bit easier to follow!

Enjoy the chapter!

Mike was in a dead sleep when he was awoken by a voice crackling over his radio. It was sitting on his bedside table, which was where it always sat at night, just in case. In case someone (Eleven) ever tried to contact him, or needed him while he slept.

"Mike?" A voice asked. "Mike, do you copy? Over." The voice was urgent.

Mike turned his lamp on and sat up quickly, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the unfamiliar light. After a few seconds, he realized the voice coming over the radio was Will's. It was weird, because Will's walkie usually was out of range from his house. He must be nearby, which meant something must have happened. Mike didn't dwell on the detail for too long.

Mike grabbed his radio. "Will? What's going on? Over." His voice was croaky from sleep. He tried to whisper, because he knew if he was

too loud Nancy would wake up and that was *not* something he wanted to deal with tonight.

"Something happened. I need to talk to you, it's a code red. But don't tell the others. Meet me at Castle Byers in 20. Over." Will said.

Mike didn't even question him. He had had another feeling as soon as his radio had woken him. "I'll be there. Just hang on. Over and out."

Eleven and Will sat in Castle Byers, waiting anxiously for Mike's arrival. Nervousness tended to make Will all jittery and fidgety, and he was bouncing his knee like there was no tomorrow. Eleven, on the other hand, seemed to react the opposite way. Stress had made her sit so still that she could have been mistaken for a statue. She was staring at the wall, and if Will had opened a dictionary and looked up the word 'anxiety', he was pretty sure he would find a picture of Eleven looking back at him. He reached out and touched her knee, wanting to comfort her.

"El. It's gonna be fine."

"You really think he won't be mad?" Eleven asked tentatively, as if she was afraid of the answer.

Will smiled at her reassuringly. "Of course not, El. If anything, he'll be mad at Hopper, not you." She looked slightly mollified by his words, but not completely.

Will was waiting outside of Castle Byers for him, standing alone and staring at the sky, as if it should be sending him an important message sometime soon. The forest surrounding them was dark and filled with creepy shadows and noises, but the small clearing around Castle Byers was just large enough to let a little bit of moonlight in.

Mike approached cautiously. "Will?"

Will shook his head, as if waking himself from a trance. "Mike. Thanks for coming." He looked at Mike solemnly, like someone had just died.

Mike was really starting to get worried. "What's wrong? Did you have *another* episode?"

Will took a deep breath, as if bracing himself. "No, but I need to talk to you about what happened in the field today." He paused. "I wasn't completely honest with you when I told you that I didn't know how I got away today. The truth is, the shadow monster was going to get me. But then someone saved me."

Mike was hopelessly bewildered. "Someone saved you? Who? And how?"

"Used my powers." A different voice spoke. A girl's voice, that sounded very familiar. The sheet blocking the doorway to Castle Byers moved aside to reveal someone Mike had begun to think he would never see again. It was *her*. It was Eleven. After three hundred and fifty three days, she had finally returned to him.

But not quite the same. She was taller. She was wearing overalls and an oversized flannel, like someone much larger than her was giving her hand-me-downs. But what was most different was that she had hair. It was dark brown and curly beyond belief, like his was if he didn't brush it out at night. It was different than he had imagined, but it made sense to him once he saw it. Of course she would have curly hair.

Mike walked forward in a trance, not being able to believe what he was seeing right in front of him.

"Eleven?" She was staring at him with sadness in her eyes. A tear slid down one cheek. "Mike."

Simultaneously, they moved towards one another and then they were hugging. He had started tearing up at some point, but he couldn't say for sure when. They held each other for a long while, just basking in the warmth that was the others' presence. While they hugged, he made a promise to himself to never become separated from her again. Mike eventually pulled back to look at her face.

"I called you every night, you know." He told her. "For-" "Three hundred and fifty three days." She finished his sentence for him. "I

know. I heard."

Mike looked at her in confusion. "Why didn't you answer me? To let me know you were okay? That you were here?" She looked down, unwilling to meet his gaze.

"Not safe for you. Been hiding."

Hiding. She had been here this whole time, in Hawkins, right under his nose. He internally cursed himself for not looking for her harder. He should have been searching for her every single day, until he had found her.

"Where?" The most important question, the one he absolutely had to know the answer to. Had she been living in the woods this whole time? What had she been eating?

She hesitantly looked at him for a few moments, saying nothing. Then-

"In the woods. Hopper found me and has a cabin there. Been with him for three hundred and twenty seven days."

Mike almost couldn't believe it. Hopper had had her? This entire time?

He went through about a dozen emotions in two seconds. Anger, at Hopper for keeping her a secret for so long. Relief, because at least she had a place to stay, with someone that would take care of her. Sadness, because she had been so close this entire time and he hadn't listened to his feelings and realized it.

Before he could say anything, Eleven spoke again, sounding more distressed than before. "Didn't want to stay away, but Hopper told me it wasn't safe, and I stayed away even though I missed you so so so much and you're probably angry and I'm really sorry, just really really sorry-" El had gotten into a stride now, and it didn't seem like she would be stopping anytime soon.

"El." Mike said, cutting her off.

"Yes?"

"I'm not mad at you." And it was true. He wasn't mad at El. He was mad at Hopper, sure. But El? Never. She was *here*. She had come back to him, and he was just relieved that she was safe.

"Really?" She was looking at him with wide brown eyes, her mouth turned up in a hopeful expression.

"Yes, really." He laughed a little, "I'm just glad that you're okay. That's what matters. And you're here now." His eyesight began to blur again, and he tried to blink away the new tears forming. "I'm just really happy you're here, El."

She gripped him tightly, like she was never going to let go. "Me too." She leaned in closer, her eyes intent on his lips. Mike involuntarily leaned in too. They were like magnets, pulling closer and closer together.

"Uh, guys?" Will's voice broke through Mike's Eleven-induced haze. He had completely forgotten that Will was even there. Oops. Will was watching the scene in front of him with a mixture of happiness and disgust on his face.

"Not trying to break up your reunion, or anything, but we need to talk. You guys will have more time to catch up, later." Will said, scrunching his nose a little. "Where you can do *that* not in front of me." The last part was mumbled, and Mike could only just make it out.

His face felt hot. Eleven looked at him with a small smile, but she let go of the death grip she had on Mike. Almost immediately after, she grabbed his hand, like she couldn't bear to be parted from him for more than a few seconds. Mike felt the same way. Her hand was his way of making sure that all of this was real, and he wasn't absolutely off his rocker crazy.

He smiled apologetically at Will, face still burning. "Sorry, Will."

Will shook his head, trying to refocus. "Right. Let's go talk." He nodded towards Castle Byers, and hastily walked inside. Mike and Eleven followed his lead, still holding hands.

Once everyone was situated, Will looked at Mike nervously, like he didn't know where to begin. After a minute or two, Mike decided to try and help Will along.

"So?" He gently prodded. "What's going on? And how the hell does El fit into this?"

Will took a deep breath. "I don't even know where to start."

"Start with today." Eleven said. Will nodded.

"Okay, so today, when I found Dart, he roared at me, and startled me into the Upside Down. The shadow monster was there." Here Will paused for a few seconds, gathering his courage before continuing. "It chased me out of the school and into the field. I still thought it might be a nightmare, so I was about to stop and tell it to go away, to try and stop these episodes from happening. But when I stopped, I heard someone calling my name. I turned around, and Eleven was running towards me. She grabbed my hand and dragged me to the edge of the woods. I could feel the shadow monster. It was right there."

"How did you get out?" Mike was enraptured.

"I pulled his mind out." Eleven answered for Will. "Could feel his mind, and I followed his at first. That's how I was in the Upside Down. Knew that I could make his mind follow me, so I forced him to and we both came back." Mike tried to process the meaning of their story.

"So the shadow monster," Mike said slowly, "it wants... Will?"

Will shuddered. "Yes. But that's not all. It feels..hungry. And it wants to kill. And it's been stalking me. It's watching us now."

A chill ran down Mike's spine. "Now?" He echoed.

"Yes." Eleven was frowning. "I can feel him."

"Can you stop Will from having more episodes?" Mike asked her worriedly.

Now El looked determined. "Yes. No more episodes. Will will be safe."

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

Will looked at Mike worriedly. "But something is going on again, in Hawkins. Something with the Upside Down. I'm worried. We need to figure out what's going on."

Mike nodded, all business now. He was in his Paladin mode. "I agree. We need to acquire more knowledge. I don't think we should go to school tomorrow. We should all meet up, like when we are supposed to go to first period. We can spend the day looking around Hawkins, to see if we can find anything. Any clues."

Eleven stopped him before he could go any further. "Can't." She stated sadly. "I can't be seen by other people."

"And I doubt my mom will let me out of the house tomorrow. I wasn't going to go to school anyways. There's no way I could sneak out." Will added.

"What if we just checked the woods? Nancy and Jonathon found things out there last year. We can start near Mirkwood and head out further into the woods from there. El won't be seen, and Will, you could just tell your mom that you want to go draw in Castle Byers."

El considered this. "Maybe. I need to be careful. Hopper already angry with me."

"For what?" Mike couldn't stop himself from asking. "For today. Someone saw me. Wasn't supposed to leave the cabin." El answered him.

"Oh. Wait, why were you at Hawkins Middle, anyways?"

"Wanted to see you." She admitted shamelessly. "Hopper keeps saying 'soon'. But soon is not close enough. Broke the rules."

Mike felt a little thrill at how rebellious she was, all for him. "Oh." He hoped he wasn't blushing again.

Will cut in pointedly, trying to get the conversation back on track, "So... back to the sneaking out thing. I really think it's not gonna happen for me. My mom is way too worried to even think about

letting me out of her sight right now."

Mike thought about this for a few seconds. "Well, what if you're our contact? El and I can radio you updates as we search."

"I'll figure something out." Will frowned. There had to be some sort of way he could get out of his house. He glanced over at Mike's watch to check the time. It was after 2 A.M. "Right. We should probably get back to our houses before our parents find out we've left. We have an early start tomorrow."

Mike nodded in agreement. "Alright. We can meet here and head over to Mirkwood from there. El, is that good with you?" She nodded.

Together, they took the short walk to Will's house, the shadows making Mike a little bit nervous. Hearing that the shadow monster was watching had done nothing to ease his anxieties. The only thing keeping Mike a little calm was the warm glow of El's flashlight, and the fact that her hand not holding the flashlight was firmly grasping his. They were just reaching Will's house when something important occurred to him. "Hey guys..should we tell Dustin and Lucas about this? I mean, don't they have a right to know?" Mike asked.

Will stopped where he was, causing Mike and El to come to an abrupt halt as well. He contemplated Mike's question. "Well, I think we should, but not yet. Let's figure out what is going on first, and *then* we'll bring in Dustin and Lucas. We need information first." He said this slowly, thinking through what he was suggesting carefully. Mike agreed with his logic.

"That's a good point. Okay, no Dustin and Lucas until we have something more to go on."

"Okay. I'll talk to you guys tomorrow. If I can end up sneaking out, I will."

"Bye, Will." Mike said. Together, he and Eleven watched as Will very quietly crept onto his front porch and slid open the window to his room. As soon as the window shut, Mike turned to El, not knowing what to say. Instead, he tugged a bit on her hand that was still intertwined with his, so she would step closer to him. She did. She

looked up at him, her mouth forming that cute little smile that was all Eleven. "I'll see you tomorrow. Promise?"

"Promise." Eleven replied. Before he could do anything else, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his, for a few wonderful seconds. When she pulled back, they smiled widely at one another.

"Bye, El." His cheeks felt like they would burst soon, he was smiling so widely. She touched his cheek, softly, in response. Then she turned around and walked back into the woods, in the direction they had just come from. Mike watched her go, hardly daring to believe that this night had been real. Everything about and surrounding El was surreal to him.

Before he crawled into bed that night, he couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that he was forgetting something important. But, he reasoned, he would remember it eventually, and it was late. He pulled the covers over his head and almost immediately felt the warm embrace of sleep wash over him, not unlike the warm embrace of El's presence he had experienced earlier.

Tell me what you think! Also, for all the action lovers, don't worry! The action will pick up from here on out! I know it's been kinda slow for these past chapters, but I needed to set up some stuff...

Hope everyone enjoyed! I'll try to get the next one out faster than this one.

And as for hints about what's coming next...we may see another someone with a number for a name make an appearance..stay tuned!